Ethnic Identities under the Tourist Gaze

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This paper examines the construction of Bai ethnicity and Bai identity on the tourist market in Dali, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China. Focusing on how the social landscape of Dali has changed in response to the development of tourism, this paper explores how Bai ethnicity is advocated as a product loaded with potential economic values. The author discovers that 'commerce of authenticity' (T. Oakes, Tourism and modernity in China. London, Routledge, 1998), and different forms of ethnicity and artefacts promoted in the tourist market have not drowned out the sense of being ethnically Bai. Instead, the tourist industry has become a daily reminder of ethnicity to both insiders and outsiders by making people more self-conscious and reflexive about the 'cultural stuff' that they may have previously taken for granted, or may have left unattended. This paper demonstrates how locals actively appropriate state-defined categories and reshape them into the repertoire they desire.

Keywords: Bai identity, Culture, Local history, Tourism development

The Bai, whose population was 1,858,063 according to the 2000 census, are one of China’s 55 state-recognized ethnic minorities. They live in northwest Yunnan Province, and especially in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture.

In efforts to promote the tourism industry, the Bai have been placed centre stage since the late 1990s. A wave of constructing local history and Bai culture emerged in the process and has been trying, to a large extent, to meet the gaze of tourists. Reifications of Bai culture have been produced and sold, bought and consumed in the form of tour packages and commodities. In this process, economic development goes hand in hand with identity strategies. Local people contrive to play different cards in order to attract tourists; renovating and inventing cultural traditions are common. A form of ‘touristic culture’ (Picard, 1996) or ‘touristic ethnicity’ (Wood, 1998) contributes to the reconstruction of Bai identity, in a way similar to the case of the Yi (see Swain, 1990, pp. 26 – 32) and Miao (Oakes, 1998), as with many other ethnic minorities elsewhere in the world, including local identities in Han areas in China.

This paper focuses on how the social landscape of Dali has changed in response to the development of tourism. The touristification of local cultures is a domain in which

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we can examine the construction of Bai Identity\(^1\) and a \textit{minzu} (ethnic) consciousness. I demonstrate that tourism provides an arena where intellectuals and ordinary people alike have a chance to manipulate forms of ethnicity, to capitalize on their traditional heritage, and to dispel the aura of ‘backwardness’ that clings to variant forms of ethnicity inside (also see Notar, 1999; Schein, 2000) and outside China. The impact of tourism has stimulated people to act ethnically upon their \textit{minzu} label. The self-reflexive symbolic activity of cultural politics is obvious in the ways that the Bai have adopted the state-granted label while maintaining their own subjectivity and treating the \textit{Baizu} label as something to be strategically deployed and represented. The tourist trade in Dali has been appropriated by various interest groups who have constructed their own versions of Bai history and culture.

This paper first introduces state initiatives that have provided local actors with the opportunity to define \textit{minzu} identity in the tourist industry. I then discuss how a one-day Dali tour package displays the Bai people and local history to tourists. I also discuss some commodities and non-Bai touristic ethnicities to illustrate the mosaic of current cultural construction and its complex relationship with the formation of Bai identity. The paper concludes that the tourist industry has become a daily reminder of ethnicity to both insiders and outsiders, and has made people more self-conscious and reflexive about the ‘cultural stuff’ that they may have previously taken for granted, or that may be left unattended.

I argue that the one-day tour package discussed in this paper is not really ‘a kind of reflexive “Orientalism”’ (Shih, 2002, pp. 66–7), which would suggest any sense of passiveness and marginalization on the part of the people concerned. Rather, it shows how locals actively appropriate state-defined categories and reshape them into the repertoire they desire.

\textbf{State Initiatives in Promoting Tourism}

Promoting ethnic cultures (\textit{hongyang minzu wenhua}) has long been an aim of the state in building an image of a multicultural nation-state. This motif has found a new application in the development of tourism. After the 1980s, tourism brought enormous economic benefits, and has become a synonym for economic improvement in official discourses. The number of domestic tourists has increased dramatically, and is taken into consideration in development planning. A common patriotic slogan is, ‘Visit the splendid landscape of the country. Learn about the long history of the country and about a unified multi-ethnic nation.’ This slogan was often displayed in the media and tourist brochures. And the 1998 national project of \textit{xibu da kaifa}, ‘Developing the western provinces’, pushed the development discourse further.

At the provincial level, tourism was one of the initiatives taken by the Yunnan government. The primary attempts to open Dali to the outside world were aimed at presenting a culturally unique and homogeneous Bai. Images of Dali and the Bai have been popularized in the minds of many Chinese by one of the only two feature films about \textit{minzu} in the 1960s and early 1970s, \textit{The Five Golden Flowers}, screened nationwide and by a bestselling \textit{gongfu} work of fiction: \textit{Demi-gods and semi-devils}

\footnote{\textit{Bai identity} is discussed here in its plural and singular forms. The plural form refers to the varieties of different identities people may adopt as Bai and to the Bai people’s self-felt identities in different degrees. The singular form is capitalized, and refers either to the group identity as projected by the Bai as a sort of collective ‘one true self’, or the collective Bai Identity assumed by, and common in the discourse of, outsiders. Both forms can be at an individual level and a collective level.}
Bai people and Bai ethnicity were regarded as solid foundations on which to base the development of tourism, an alternative way to achieve modernity (Oakes, 1998). So Dali has been marketed as a locality where tourists can consume Bai culture, while most of its other residents, including the Han and some other ethnic minorities, are ignored in such promotions.

Governments at all levels invested to improve the basic infrastructure of the region, which enables Dali to possess two of the three minimum conditions for the development of a tourist industry, as Seiler-Baldinger (1988) identifies: ethnicity, accessibility and infrastructure. The number of hotels in Dali grew from 56 in 1995 to 128 in 1999, ranking it third in the whole country in its number of hotels authorized to take in foreigners in one city at that time. Transportation also took on a new look. Compared with a two-day journey from Kunming in the early 1980s, the opening of Dali airport in 1995 meant the provincial capital city Kunming was only a 45-minute flight away. In the first half of 1995, total tourist arrivals in Dali reached 1.54 million (1.52 million domestic tourists and 20,000 from overseas). In 1998, tourism brought in 1.088 billion yuan and created more than 130,000 jobs.

The Yunnan government originally chose Dali to initiate its campaign for tourism not because of ‘marginality’ (Wood, 1998, p. 6) as in most ethnic tourist destinations in Southeast Asian countries, but because of history and the Bai ethnicity. Re-establishing local history and promoting the Bai as part of that history was therefore crucial.

Dali's touristic cultural capital is often advertised as ‘the homeland of the Bai people’, and ‘the hometown of the Five Golden Flowers’. In the first few years of tourism promotion, historical sites in Dali were emphasized. Dali’s past history as the centre of the glorious Nanzhao Kingdom (752–902 AD) and the powerful Dali Kingdom (938–1382 AD) was frequently invoked. The tourist map of Dali included the southern gate of the ancient town, first built in 1382, also called Wuhualou; the Tower of Five Glories (see Fitzgerald, 1941); Three Pagodas (built during the Dali Kingdom) where more than 680 archival treasures were discovered during a renovation in 1978; Wuwei Temple (a Buddhist monastery); Guanyin pond, a Buddhist nunnery built around the fourteenth or fifteenth century; Nanzhao Dehua Stele inscribed in 766 to record the political and military affairs of the Nanzhao Kingdom; and Du Wenxiu’s Tomb first built in 1917 by local people in honour of the Hui Muslim general who led a failed rebellion in 1872.

The Politics of Representation

The invention of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’, including sports, food, music and heritage, has been thoroughly discussed in academic literature (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983;
Robertson, 1992). This section will discuss how locality, local practices and history in Yunnan have been transformed into a kind of heuristic device to cater for the quest for knowledge and experience by tourists. Local place and history become known as ‘local characteristics’ (difang tese) and are now taken for granted as Bai characteristics in Dali. Here, the issue is not about equal representation in the tourist process, but an issue of self-representation and staging the Bai’s own authenticity.

The Making of a Historical Place

In this reconstruction of a historical Dali, the local place was connected with historical events and high profile figures in local legends and folklore. An example is the Mount Cangshan area where many Buddhist temples and pagodas can be found. A small stream in the mountains is introduced in a tour guidebook as a place visited in 1636 by the famous Ming dynasty traveller, Xu Xiake (1586 – 1641). Lines from his well-known travel notes are cited to describe this stream. Similarly, it is said that according to local legend, a natural pool in Cangshan Mountain is called ‘Horse Bathing Pond’, which acquired its name from the time when Kublai Khan took his army there and gave his horse a bath in it.9 Fitzgerald (1941) mentioned the same pool (Hsi Ma T’ang) that attracted local young residents in the late 1930s. In the version by Fitzgerald (1941, p. 185), the legend goes that ‘a deity brings his celestial steeds to this place’. The point is that stories about the same pool have been passed on and revised. The contemporary version constitutes a clear attempt to associate this pool with a famous historical figure.

Other efforts have been made to locate historical figures such as Marco Polo as a visitor to Dali. If one puts aside such stories, or simply ignores them, these places are nothing. Such interpretations and attached historical meanings cater to tourist desires for ‘educational’ tours, part of the expectations of domestic visitors to ‘see’ what they may have learned from textbooks and the media about Dali history and the Bai people.

Local history has also been reconstructed in a more tangible way by tourist entrepreneurs. A modern exhibition of Dali history was portrayed in the Nanzhao Culture Exhibition Centre (nanzhao wenhua chen),10 which was built in 1999 to ‘represent the history, culture, important events and religious practices of the Nanzhao Kingdom’ (752 – 902 AD), according to its promotional brochure. This establishment gave visual form to a fundamental link between Dali, the Nanzhao Kingdom, Bai culture and the Bai people. The exhibits in this showcase were assumed to represent zhēn (authentic) ethnic Bai culture and traditions. Regardless of what kind of history this particular tourist establishment presents, it marks a new era in which Dali displays its historical artefacts by digging up historical and cultural resources.11 The Nanzhao Culture Exhibition Centre was a showcase that attempted ‘to fix and define, locate and regulate fluid and malleable populations and local identities’ (Tapp, 2002). However, it was soon taken over by the other establishments discussed in the following sections. Local people simply blame this on the ‘bad luck’ of the investor, while local government officials criticized it as a ‘blind development project’ for its failure to attract tourists.

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9 Whether Kublai Khan made it there or not is still a question. This story and his statues in one of the local temples make local people believe that he did.
10 The principal investor was said to be from Hong Kong and to have cooperated in this venture with the local government. By the end of 2003, it no longer attracted any tourists.
11 A similar replica was set up in Guangzhou in the late 1980s and in Beijing in the early 1990s. The main objective was surely to earn cash income through admission and other services, to enable big state-owned leisure parks to support themselves instead of remaining totally dependent on state fiscal revenues.
Both officials and common people were all clear it was a business enterprise rather than an expression of Bai ethnicity.

History and place are also displayed in the furniture of the first hotel in Ancient Town of Dali, the Five Golden Flowers Hotel. All the furniture is in traditional Bai style, made from local marble and wood, and all hotel attendants are required to wear Bai costumes.

The above discussion shows that local history, traditions, the place and the Bai people have been open to modifications. The following section will focus on what is assembled in present-day Dali and presented as ‘Bai’ for tourists in a one-day tour package, in which bits and pieces of local history have been recycled to attract business and launch ‘Bai-ness’.

**Dali One-day Tour**

The one-day tour package that most tourists take is organized to encompass the cultural capital of the Bai, their social life, history, *benzhu* cults that worship local gods and goddesses, and Bai-style architecture. The tour starts from a ferry that takes tourists across Erhai Lake. On the ferry, Bai singing and dancing are performed in fancy costumes. There is also a re-enactment of a supposed wedding. A so-called ‘Bai three-course tea’ is served with explanations about its meaning and relevance to the daily life of the Bai. After the singing and dancing, passengers can pay a fee and have their photos taken with the dancers, mostly girls in Bai costume.

The first stop is Nanzhao Feature Island, which will be discussed later. Then tourists are taken to a ‘traditional’ Bai house with a white screen and courtyard. A girl in Bai costume performs tea-making, while another serves them. The staged three-course tea and tea-making in a Bai house allows tourists to experience what is presented as Bai life. After the tea-break, the tourists are taken to the Butterfly Pond where the 1950s feature film was shot, and where big posters with clips from the film decorate the path. Couples hire Bai costumes and have their photos taken there to commemorate their love, as the theme of the film suggests. The next scenic stop is the Three Pagodas, first built around the mid-ninth century. The final stop is the ancient town of Dali, where clusters of shops sell ‘ethnic products’, as one will find at all other stops.

Domestic tourists generally commented that they were coming to see the ‘authentic’ Bai; and overseas Chinese tourists, the ‘real’ China. The products included in this day tour encourage tourists to search for examples of authentic Bai-ness and local history. Most domestic tourists have come to experience cultural differences between Han and Bai, evident in the distinct language, food and imagined exotic way of life such as snap marriage. The one-day package tour allows them to see, experience and taste a form of Bai culture, and reinforce their previous imaginations about Dali and the Bai.

At each stop, there are a variety of stalls and booths selling various local products. In the ancient town of Dali, street vendors often stopped tourists to persuade them to buy some of the Dali marble art and crafts because ‘it is our Bai product with local characteristics, an ideal souvenir to take home’. Also claimed as traditional Bai products are tie-dye products ranging from tablecloths to fashionable clothes. Ethnicity sells, and ordinary people are responding actively to market pressures to make the best they can out of it.

Business agencies (representing rural collectors, urban business people and international business people from France, the US, Thailand, Japan and Holland) as well as tourists, all come to Dali for what they see as ‘authentic’ and ‘old’ exotic
antiques, which are not necessarily Bai. To meet these demands, local business people are in a quest for ‘old’ and ‘authentic’ antiques. When out of stock, they have started to make things look old, and no specific ethnic origins are made obvious. The meaning/story that is subsequently attached to a given commodity therefore usually eclipses its true origin. Some people claim a Bai identity for themselves and their goods, while others adopt other minzu identities in response to market demands. Some ethnicities are more enticing than others in the Bai marketplace.

The tourists’ search for authenticity and exoticism also encourages the locals to act ethnically and to present, if not to make, difference. In order to develop a good position in the market, locals actively exoticize themselves and differentiate themselves as ethnic others in the competition to achieve their own material ends, or ‘scarce resources’ in Barth’s (1969) terms. Locals therefore adopt whatever may be marketable from neighbouring peoples such as the Hui, Yi, Tibetan, Miao and Han people rather than restricting themselves to original Bai traditions, to provide the tourist with his/her ‘tangible evidence of travel’ (Graburn, 1978).

Thus, the encounter with tourism enhances a sense of ethnicity and self-awareness among members of a minzu and Hanzu. Tourism actually offers, despite official images of Dali as overwhelmingly Bai, more space. It also involves more participants, for a presumed traditional Bai culture to flourish and be transformed, by comparison with the Bai label and the National Ethnic Classification Project undertaken in the 1950s.

Nanzhao Feature Island

Nanzhao Feature Island is one of the stops in the one-day tour and receives many thousands of tourists each year, basically all organized by the Local Tourism Bureau. It is a showcase built on an isolated island in Erhai Lake that decontextualizes and fragments elements of local history to be reframed as ‘a collection of signs’ (Urry, 1990, p. 3) of the history of the Bai and an exotic Bai culture.

There are four main sites of architecture on the island: Nanzhao Palace, Yunnan Mascot Square, Benzhu Cultural Square and the Origin Myth Sculpture. The so-called Nanzhao Palace is claimed to have been rebuilt on the original site according to the tour guide, and is now a hotel, while Yunnan Mascot Square displays some historical stories in drawings and frescos on an encircling wall. It is called Yunnan rather than Bai or Dali, I assume, because historical stories about the beginning of, and prior to, the Nanzhao kingdom are all locally related to the Yi. It is not possible to claim this place is Bai, and there is an obvious reluctance to make it Yi. So Yunnan is employed as an all-embracing place identity. The politics of representation are played out here in that the same attractions may be presented in a different manner by different actors for different purposes and in different contexts. There is no opportunity (social space) for a fair or equal representation of the Yi in the architecture of Yunnan Mascot Square.

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12 Nearby Bai villagers involved themselves in the tourist market because of a reduction in available arable land and decreasing yields from fishing. Commercial fishing was totally banned in response to environmental concerns in 1999.
13 For foreigners, the most popular ethnic items in the numerous local antique shops are Miao embroideries and silverware, although these foreigners pay little attention to the goods’ origins.
14 Fieldwork conducted in May 2005.
As Figure 1 shows, meticulous planning can be seen in the Benzhu Cultural Square, where there are nine sculptured figures of benzhu, the village gods and goddesses. On the lower part of all these benzhu statues, there is a short note about him/her, which does not really tell who the figure is of, or where or how this particular figure became a Bai benzhu. Duan Zongbang is in the front central position, guarded by two other common monster benzhu: Mahakala and the Northern God. On each side of Duan, there are four benzhu sculptures. There is no way of finding out who decided which gods to present here and where they should be positioned. Tourists appear to take the arrangement for granted.

Mahakala is one of the most popular monster benzhu in Bai communities. There are many stories about him saving lives and helping locals along Erhai Lake. I was unable to discover who the Northern God is or where he comes from during my fieldwork in nearby villages. According to Yang Zhengye (1994, pp. 199–219), both the Northern God and Mahakala are Buddhist deities, but Yang’s evidence for this claim is not convincing.

What is important here is the selection of these particular benzhu and their position within the formation in this particular square, which was intended to display Bai religious cults. According to traditional Chinese concepts of space, the most important position is stage left. In their formation in the square, the first benzhu on stage left is the God of Fortune. This is a secondary god in almost all benzhu and non-benzhu temples, but its placement here as first on stage left indicates a very important position. I have never seen, read or heard of anything of the next statue, the Phoenix Goddess. The note about her image explains that she loves to live in a nice environment with clear water, woody forest and quietness, and she takes responsibility for environmental protection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duan Zongbang</th>
<th>Mahakala</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern God</td>
<td>God of fortune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhangle Jinqiu</td>
<td>Goddess phoenix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>张乐进求</td>
<td>王乐宽</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Bejie</td>
<td>Wang LeKuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>柏节夫人²</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Li Mi</td>
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<tr>
<td>李宓</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhen Hui</td>
<td>Kublai Khan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>郑回</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Positions of all benzhu in Benzhu Cultural Square

¹The Chinese characters for Duan’s name can be various homophones.
²The Chinese characters for Lady Bejie can be various homophones, including 白姐 and 白姐.

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15 According to Lien Juichih (2003, pp. 284–89), Mahakala was first introduced to Dali during 712–728, and many tuzhu (local patron gods) are Mahakala, although not all the temples housing this god are called tuzhu temples. Mahakala is often worshipped in other parts of Yunnan, either as a main or secondary god in local patron god temples.
Next is Wang Lekuang, who is worshipped as a Bai general with his family; as a triumphant general in the village where the island is administratively located. Compared with the position of these three *benzhu* on Duan’s left side, Kublai Khan has been given the least important position here, which contrasts sharply to his position in *Zhongyang Ci*, located in the same administrative township.

On stage right, Zhangle Jingqiu, the legendary Bai king of *Bai Zi Guo*, sits first. His legend is important, as it is said that Zhangle Jingqiu gave his throne to the first Nanzhao king who was from the Yi when Zhang saw signs. Lady Bejie is the next figure. That the *benzhu* come from different ethnic backgrounds is revealed in the eight flanking *benzhu* in the square. Li Mi was a Han general sent by the Tang court in 751 AD. 16 Zhen He is from the Hui, a captive from the troops sent by the Tang court; Kublai Khan is a Mongolian.

During my fieldwork, I went to temples containing one of each of these *benzhu* except Zhang and Zhen He, who were, nevertheless, well recorded in print. The positioning of these *benzhu* in Benzhu Cultural Square and the inclusion of one goddess illustrates how contemporary decision-makers are constructing history in their preferred ways.

Another matter that is visualized and made salient on Nanzhao Feature Island is the origin myth. For the Bai, there is no one unifying origin myth, but a number of these myths that relate to the origin of part of the Bai (see Lien, 2003) or to different ethnic minorities in the same area. One of these stories was chosen and is displayed near the landing stage of Nanzhao Feature Island. It presents a statue of Mother Sayi with an introduction about her inscribed. According to the tour guide (recorded May 2005):

> Sayi is said to be a woman from Ailao Mountain (northwest of current Yunnan) who conceived by touching a piece of wood and gave birth to ten brothers. The Bai and the Yi were among these ten, and thus Sayi became the origin mother of these two ethnic groups.

From the Benzhu Square and Mother Sayi sculpture, it is hard to tell whether the creators of this feature island have constructed a landscape that is more meaningful to the Bai or to tourists (see Oakes, 1998, p. 71 for a similar case among the Miao). Perhaps it is for both. The tourist market provides not only a place where tourists seek authentic ethnicity but, more importantly, a stage where Bai ethnic identity can be developed with the blessing of the state, and as a tool for the local people to negotiate with the outside world for a better share of the market. 17 A tourist culture is emerging, but differences between authentic and touristic do not necessarily disappear, as Oakes (2006, p. 169) points out about the Miao. The one-day tour package demonstrates that Bai ethnicity in the Dali tourist market is much more varied and complex than it appears, or is assumed by the tourist media.

**Various Representations**

As the discussion above indicates, the extent and kinds of display that locals of Dali choose to expose to tourists may vary. But the central theme is always the same and

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16 See Dong Jianzhong (1988) for more on the cult of Li Mi among the Bai.
17 This does not necessarily mean Bai ethnic identity is the only way people can represent themselves.
monolithic: Dali is the origin place of the Bai, with a long and glorious history. At the same time, this monolithic image of the Bai history of Dali is subject to different interpretations. Both hosts and guests embrace multi-ethnic features in a Bai setting presumed to be homogeneous. Local people are exploiting whatever they can find that appears to be traditional and exotic. And the tourists may be attracted to non-Bai ethnic items that the Dali market offers. I exemplify this phenomenon with the most well-known marketplace, Yangren Jie or Foreign Lane.

The tourist market provides a space for a symbiosis of plural ethnicity as well as different interpretations and expectations of ethnicity. Foreign Lane in the heart of Dali is a direct product of tourism development and its expression of ethnic varieties. Foreign Lane was once a small lane (about 200 metres long and 8 metres wide) by the side of the Five Golden Flowers Hotel, the first hotel in the ancient town of Dali, which used to be the only hotel authorized to house foreign guests. Before the state-run hotel was able to figure out how to cater for its overseas guests with cold drinks and coffee, nearby small restaurants and eating places quickly took advantage of the opportunity. The first cafe was opened in 1988 by a local artist. Foreign Lane is now full of bars and cafes where no such thing existed before the 1980s.

The name Yangren Jie is ambiguous in Chinese and in English. In both languages it could be understood as a lane filled with foreign tourists or one inhabited/managed by foreigners. Yangren Jie is an ideal stage for the locals to display ethnicities and for the tourists to find what they can expect from this place and these people. The settings of cafes and bars make overseas tourists feel at home while domestic tourists feel exotic, yet the internal details also express a strong local flavour. Owners and managers deliberately decorate their establishments with ‘authentic’ ethnic characteristics: things suggesting a remote ethnic origin (mostly Tibetan), or exemplifying a mosaic of ethnic backgrounds with Buddhist scriptures, tokens, paintings, pictures and household antiques.

At the same time, a strong western flavour is also apparent: tables made in a western style, western music and leisure readings on the bookshelves, ice cubes in drinks and western cuisine. Bars and cafes offer western food in a Chinese setting and create an atmosphere where east meets west; tradition fits in with modernity to meet demands from both domestic and overseas clients. This has becoming a selling point in the Chinese tourist brochures too. It presents a chance for domestic tourists to gaze at foreign tourists and consume a foreign atmosphere on the Chinese territory.

And overseas tourists can find safe and clean food in a cosy and relaxing Eastern environment in a small southwest frontier town of China—old, rough, mysterious and traditional.

Given the proportion of overseas Chinese tourists, who made up about 70 per cent of total international arrivals in 1999, their interest in exotica may explain the preference for a Tibetan identity (all the shrines) rather than the identity of any other local ethnic group. Domestic tourists (mostly from coastal and northeast China) are also keen on traditional Tibetan herbal medicine, because Dali has long been a trading place for Tibetans and for Tibetan herbal traders with their magical remedies in history (also see Fitzgerald, 1941). Domestic tourists can also experience what they assume to

18 Iced water is not a daily necessity and usually cannot be found in homes and Chinese restaurants.
be a western style of life, often perceived as leisurely and romantic, as well as the exotic ethnicities of the far Tibetan frontier.

The first cafe in Foreign Lane was a ‘Tibetan cafe’ which targeted foreign tourists. The owner saw to it that everything in the cafe looked Tibetan: colour, paintings and copies of Buddhist scriptures on coloured flags. Other cafes with some Tibetan features can be found nearby. A typical one is a cafe owned by a Bai woman painter, where the altar in the room, the door curtain and the paintings on the wall suggest everything about the cafe is connected with Tibet. This cafe relied more on her paintings than on food and beverages for income between 1990 and 2004. The clearly expressed Tibetan ethnicity does not have to be consistent with the owners’ ethnic identity; it conveys exotic meanings to tourists. This is quite unlike one of the local marketplaces, where no effort is made to stage ethnicity or authenticity except for a few traders who took their stall from Ancient Town Dali for potential western tourists.

What is staged in this market is quite unlike the exclusive Bai identity promoted by the state and tourist developers. When we compare the 1930s market with the present one, the current market presents a multi-ethnic flavour rather than an exclusively Bai atmosphere. In 1938, 52.7 per cent of the businesses on the main street were run by Min-chia and a small number of Tibetan traders who sold their yields from the mountains (Fitzgerald, 1941, pp. 53–4). In 1999, most of the businesses on Foreign Lane were owned by locals in Dali (not necessarily Bai). Contemporary commodities are quite different; souvenir shops and marble shops comprise two-thirds of the establishments, and the remainder are cafes and restaurants. In 1938, there were 64 restaurants and teahouses (the Bai people are known in China for their traditional three-course tea) run by Bai people in Dali (Fitzgerald, 1941, pp. 53–4), but there is not a single Bai teahouse or cafe today. All the shops are owned and managed by private entrepreneurs. In this sector, local government officials do not bother to regulate their behaviour ‘except for coming to collect tax’, as one informant said. The irony is that this small lane lost most of its local and Bai features once it became an important feature on the Dali Bai tourist market.

Compared with the building of an exclusively Bai identity, this section shows that individuals have the opportunity and freedom to express who they are and what they choose to represent. This is not to say that they are what they stage/sell, but to point out that the tourism has nurtured a sense of being ethnically distinctive. Acting out ethnicity meets the tourists’ ‘misplaced desire for authenticity’ (Oakes, 1998), and ensures the locals a bigger share of this market. Moreover, foreign guests become targets of the gaze of domestic tourists. The observer becomes the observed, precisely because of the overwhelming influence of the observer on the apparently observed.

It must be pointed out here that such cultural showcases are not necessarily interpreted in the same way by the local Bai. On the one hand, ethnicity can be shaped in very practical and highly structured terms to cater for consumption needs; the market place and the tour are consciously organized to appear as ethnically Bai. Yet, on the other hand, many successful business people and villagers reject the authenticity of such apparent ‘Bai’ commodities. Unlike Emily Chao’s (1996) Naxi informants, who were enthusiastic about the modern, colourful versions of the more traditional costumes, my Bai informants were quite critical. They criticized, for example, the so-called ‘three-course tea’, claiming that it was not at all Bai tradition, but just a very common and flexible regional practice. They alleged that there was nothing really
ethnically significant about having three different courses or particular ingredients, and all the meanings associated with this tea practice were invented.\textsuperscript{19}

Another tourist establishment about which they expressed strong opinions is Nanzhao Feature Island, which they insisted was merely an isolated island. They claimed that, until the tourism push, no one had ever heard that the island was the summer palace of the Nanzhao king; the story was simply made up.\textsuperscript{20}

### Changing Attitudes Towards Ethnicity

When China opened its doors to the outside world in the late 1970s and early 1980s, foreigners were understood to have a great deal of interest in ethnicity (also see Blum, 1994, p. 97). International tourists were at first limited in their direct contact with rural and ethnic people. It was understood that these people displayed what foreigners would interpret as ‘backwardness’, which would bring shame to Chinese socialism. After tourism developed, however, this understanding fell away.

Ethnic identity has now acquired economic value. All the beneficiaries—the state, local community and tourists—have their own stereotyped memories and interpretations of so-called ‘traditional Bai cultural traits’. What is believed to be ‘traditional’ and unique to the Bai has been reinvented. Cultural traditions have become mere raw materials in the construction of ethnic identities, which are mediated by official terminology as well as by the effects of the tourist gaze. As illustrated above, the presentation of reality is not really exclusively Bai at all. Tourism has brought about a change in people’s attitudes towards ethnicity. Throughout Chinese history, state discourses have formed a polarizing paradigm of hierarchy and strongly advocated assimilationism. Ethnic groups were long regarded as ‘savage’, ‘barbarian’ and ‘uncivilized’ during the Imperial period. In the Republic era (1912 – 1949), Republican President Sun Yat-sen recognized the ‘Five Peoples of China’ (\textit{wuzu gonghe}). The socialist state (People’s Republic of China, 1949 – present) adopted a social evolutionary theory based on Frederick Engels’ elaboration of Lewis Henry Morgan’s model; \textit{minzu} minority societies were regarded as ‘backward’ (\textit{luohou}) in contrast to Han people’s ‘advanced’ (\textit{xianjinde}) culture.

The new development discourses often refer to \textit{minzu} culture as ‘conservative’ (\textit{baoshoude}, in contrast to ‘progressive/open’) which, together with ‘simple’ (\textit{dancun}) as opposed to sophisticated social organization and economic life, are the causes of ‘poverty’ and ‘underdevelopment’. Tourism, however, has changed this situation. Discourses of hierarchy have been replaced by discourses of authenticity, removing ethnicity from a progress-versus-backwardness continuum and its negative evaluations (White, 1998); ‘authentic’ cultural traits and practices have become highly valued. Ethnic background and ethnic cultures no longer necessarily make people feel ashamed or disadvantaged; ethnicity is something about which people often feel proud and are willing or pleased to reveal.

Some studies of the impact of tourism on indigenous communities have the underlying assumption that cultural changes are leading to a gradual homogenization.
of cultures in which the local identity must be assimilated into the stronger visiting culture. Yet this is not the case in Dali (see also Mackerras, 1988). The western culture introduced by tourism and the Tibetan culture that has long been a feature of the area have not assimilated the Bai, and will not. In their own way, local people are enriching their cultural stage by displaying what is totally alien to their tradition. The people in Dali are pursuing, as they always have, alternatives to express their identity. As Blum (2001, p. 171) puts it, ‘They have long embraced assimilation while retaining just enough evident features to identity them as ethnically other’ in changing political and socio-economic contexts.

Tourism has offered local actors a certain degree of control over how they are identified. These people are happy to identify with the Bai label while renovating other cultural traits and staging what is profitable for them and their communities. For people in Dali, ethnic identity is a useful tool with which to make a profit from the outside world. They demarcate their ethnic identity with the state label, on the one hand, while on the other, they make sure that shifts of identity are possible when necessary, at least in the tourist market.

The Dali tourist market challenges the assumption that many Chinese people tend to choose an ethnic identity merely to ensure privileges from the state. The flexibility of ethnicity is due not only to state imperatives and perceived advantages, but also to the demands of the market. The question in Dali now is which ethnic identity to present, rather than whether to choose a Bai or Han Chinese status. This phenomenon requires a more flexible and forward-looking attitude towards culture and a new sense of ethnic identity. The tourist industry has opened up to the locals the possibilities of sustaining ethnic identity while adopting a wide range of non-Bai cultural traits. Local people have realized the importance of both a clearly demarcated Bai label and blurring boundaries.

Conclusion
As we see in this study of the Bai in Dali, the effects of tourism extend far beyond the immediate interactions between locals (hosts) and tourists (guests). Tourism strengthens the awareness of ethnic difference and the Bai make use of the state-defined Baizu label in the production of a tourist sphere.

As a response to the demands of the tourist industry, staged ethnicity has led towards the (re)-construction of cultural tradition and has made people more self-conscious and reflexive about the ‘cultural stuff’ that they may have previously taken for granted, or may have left unattended. The Bai know that Nanzhao Feature Island is merely a construction for economic purposes; they think the promotion of three-course tea as ‘Bai’ is a joke; they are happy to sell Tibetan and Yi products to tourists; the tourists go to a street of western cafes decorated as Tibetan. Such a touristic ethnicity is not necessarily a ‘debasement and ultimately the destruction of ethnic culture itself’ (Wood, 1998, p. 227). It contributes to the sense of ethnicity on the part of the local people and tourists. And there is no reason to assume an ‘authentic’ ethnic culture was there before the advent of tourism.

The tourist trade has itself been appropriated by a Bai cultural discourse of identity and meaning. Tourism has become central to the Bai in the ancient town of Dali. It is now part of their culture and part of their ethnic identity. Many Bai traditions, though hardly identifiable as such by other Bai people, have been shaped by the market in Dali. But it does not matter as long as a clear Bai identity is
anchored there. This is a situation in which the production of ethnic culture and identity becomes necessary and achievable through staging and commodifying a presumed continuity of local culture and history, which itself has demonstrated historical flexibility. In identifying with bits of multicultural traditions, locals are exploiting the rigid official category and challenging the idea of an unchanging homogeneous Bai Identity. They are actually influencing Bai-ness even though non-Bai cultural content is common, which I interpret as a mix of the people’s subjectivity in manoeuvring for a secure economic environment with their uncertainties about ethnic identity.

Currently, ethnic identities are intertwined with the building of a regional and national development strategy; people readily observe and identify with a mixture of cultural traits for reasons and motivations beyond any single concern of a primordial or instrumentalist approach. Bai identity has been reconstructed without a close check on historical accuracy or close adherence to the line set by the state. The state, entrepreneurs, local government, local community and tourists have all had their share in bringing into reality a compound construct that all parties are happy to identify with as Bai.

When the official Baizu label was first granted, the Bai people experienced what Bentley (1987, p. 43) calls a crisis of ethnic identity. Now the official Baizu category helps them pin down their minzu identity, if not their ethnic identity, to help overcome the crisis. The tourist market helps them to gain more confidence in identifying with the Baizu label, and this identification has permeated to the ordinary people. The economic activities of individuals in the tourist industry have become more like a daily reminder of ethnicity to both insiders and outsiders. This new formation of ethnic identity is also an effective adjustment from a planned economy to a market economy. Tourism is an ideal stage where the different parties and their contributions to building up a Bai identity in the tourist map of Dali are displayed, and how contrived ethnic identity is manipulated to varying extents and made meaningful for the sake of perceived benefits.

The engagement of the Bai in tourism also shows us that interpretations of identity require a dialogical understanding of the motivations and interests of different actors in a given political-economic setting. The ‘new reconstitutions of tradition’ (Siu, 1989) do not entail, as Siu insightfully concludes and Anagnost (1994) reiterates, the same perceptions as in the past. Such revivals express a strong motivation to manipulate the tourist market. People are both agents and victims, who are accomplices in a process of change (see Siu, 1989, p. 301). The quest for authenticity allows locals to manoeuvre for their own sake.

A separation between the ‘tourist sphere’ and everyday life is obvious in the social behaviour and ideas of local people, so it does not seem likely to be mitigated and eventually vanish as in some cases in Southeast Asian countries, as Cohen (2001) predicted. Although some touristic ethnicity has been absorbed into the culture and social life of the Bai, the difference between ‘authentic’ and ‘touristic’ has not necessarily disappeared here, as the Bai seem fully aware of the two different spheres and are happy to swim in, and benefit from, both.

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21 In his study of overseas Chinese, Wang Gungwu (1991, p. 205) calls on scholars to link economic activities with questions of Chinese identity.
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References


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